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ITS eases Bell Road traffic

By Matt Loeschman, Independent Newspapers

Surprise, Peoria and the Sun Cities share some qualities but the one thing that links them — literally and figuratively — is Bell Road.

The Northwest Valley's main east/west thoroughfare cuts through all the communities and as population continues to grow, keeping traffic flowing smoothly presents a constant challenge.

"It's one of the biggest issues we deal with," Surprise City Engineer Dr. Robert Maki said.

For Sun City, Sun City West and Surprise residents, Bell Road provides one of the few connections to Peoria and Glendale — and to Valley freeways. With few Surprise residents working in their own city, the road provides one of two main entrances and exits to the community and drivers clog the road both heading east to their jobs and driving west toward home.

In Peoria, Bell Road serves as a business and shopping hub, with new car dealerships, office complexes and retailers popping up monthly.

Several projects are complete or in the works to attempt to make the Bell Road driving experience less of a "nightmare."

Surprise officials approved a major reconstruction of the road and phase one greatly improved the road structure west of Grand Avenue. The 1.75-mile stretch of westbound Bell from Grand Avenue to Parkview Place was the first phase of a five year, \$12.5-million Bell Road Reconstruction project by the city, a project rebuilding Bell Road in each direction from Grand Avenue to the Beardsley Canal.

But while Bell Road may now be smoother, it does not diminish the sheer number of vehicles using the busy thoroughfare on a daily basis.

At a Nov. 7 Arizona Department of Transportation meeting regarding Grand Avenue improvements, Surprise Senior Transportation Planner Randy Overmyer confirmed what many Surprise residents were thinking.

"We did a study and counted more than 70,000 vehicles crossing the Agua Fria River on Bell Road during a one-day period," Mr. Overmyer reported. "We believe this makes Surprise's portion of Bell Road possibly the busiest road in the state."

Dr. Maki said the 70,000 vehicles marked the most counted in Surprise over a 24-hour span.

“We had counted 65,000 in the past, but 70,000 is the highest we have seen,” the city engineer noted. “And that’s been consistent — we’ve seen it more than once. It was not a fluke.”

There were more than 70,000 vehicles Nov. 12 that crossed Coyote Lakes Parkway in both directions, according to a recent traffic count.

A major boost to improving traffic flow is the implementation of the Intelligent Transportation System that spans multiple communities along Bell Road. The system, a joint project with Maricopa County and the city of Peoria, runs from Loop 101 to Grand Avenue and includes television cameras, message signs and a traffic control center in Surprise City Hall allowing staff to view the traffic conditions and remotely control traffic signals. The ITS cost about \$1 million, with Surprise using grant funds to kick in its \$170,000 share.

“The ITS is complete on the section of Bell east of Grand Avenue,” Dr. Maki confirmed. “We are monitoring traffic and we are changing the timing of traffic signals to improve traffic flow.”

The system allows for more accurate traffic counts, he added, and cameras are now in place along Bell Road.

“We have four cameras in operation and three more on the way,” Dr. Maki explained. “It is an effective way to watch for abnormalities with the traffic flow.”

Since the system took effect, travel times along Bell in Surprise have improved, according to the city engineer.

“On travel runs, we’ve noted the time to get from Grand Avenue to Loop 101 has been reduced by up to 20 percent,” Dr. Maki said. “It is having a very noticeable effect.”

In fiscal year 2008-09, the next section of the system will be installed west of Grand Avenue to Sunrise Boulevard, he added.

“We will also bring the operation to the new traffic operations center adjacent to the public safety building,” Dr. Maki said. “All the entities will coordinate and emergency personnel will have access to the video screens from where they are.”

Peoria’s portion of Bell Road has also seen positive effects from the ITS.

Traffic flow on Bell Road in Peoria from 71st Avenue to Loop 101 is regulated by Glendale on the north half of the road, while Peoria claims the southern portion.

From the Loop 101 to 91st Avenue, Peoria has jurisdiction. The county takes over traffic control until the roadway hits Surprise near 114th Avenue.

“The ITS has allowed Peoria, Surprise and Maricopa County to really work together on improving the situation,” said Peoria Traffic Signal Systems Specialist Steve Blair. “From our perspective, it’s made a big difference. Traffic flow is doing a lot better than it used to.”

The statistics back up Mr. Blair’s statement.

According to Peoria data, westbound Bell Road traffic experienced a 24-percent reduction in delays during the morning peak hour. The middle of the day saw a 5 percent reduction while afternoon peak hour traffic improved just slightly.

Peoria’s traffic counts nearly match those of Surprise, according to Mr. Blair.

There were 34,500 vehicles Nov. 13 that traveled eastbound on Bell Road crossing 87th Avenue. The westbound vehicle count was 33,564, meaning more than 68,000 vehicles crossed the Bell/87th intersection during the 24-hour span.

In Sun City, the question is less about traffic volume and more about speed. However, studies reveal more than 60,000 vehicles per day use the portion of Bell Road between 91st and 115th avenues.

“It is one of the busiest, if not the busiest, stretch of roadway in Maricopa County,” noted Roger Ball of the Maricopa County Department of Transportation.

One year ago, MCDOT raised the speed limit from 35 mph to 45 mph in Sun City to match Bell Road on each side of the retirement community.

“It was the safest, best thing to do to make Bell Road traffic run more smoothly,” Mr. Ball explained.

But Sun City residents, including transportation expert Gary Bourne, feared raising the speed limit would lead to more serious accidents.

The Sun City stretch of Bell Road was set at 35 mph when the retirement community was isolated from other more densely populated areas of the Valley. But as development sprung up around Sun City, established in 1959, speed limits were set higher in adjacent communities of Peoria and Surprise.

Many Surprise residents use that portion of Bell Road to exit the community on their way to work, including Joe McNulty.

“I use Bell all the time,” he explained. “It’s really the only way out of Surprise besides Grand Avenue. I never understood why the speed limit dropped to 35 mph in Sun City — it’s the same number of lanes. I don’t see any safety issue there.”

In the past year, major accidents have not increased in the area where the speed limit was raised.

While accidents have not escalated, Bell traffic remains a major headache for many motorists.

“You would hope it would get better in the future,” Mr. McNulty explained. “I know there are plans under way to help the situation. But Surprise residents don’t have much choice but to use it — it’s the main road in and out of town.”